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Sachweh, Patrick

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Criticizing Inequality? How Ideals of Equality Do – and Do Not – Contribute to the De-Legitimation of Inequality in Contemporary Germany

Patrick Sachweh [*]

Abstract: *»Kritik der Ungleichheit? Gleichheitsideale und ihr Beitrag zur Delegitimation sozialer Ungleichheit in Deutschland«.* Social inequality in modern societies requires legitimation. Yet, while ideals of equality are ascribed a central role in philosophical and public debates about inequality and social justice, less is known about how ordinary people draw on principles of equality in criticizing and justifying social inequalities in the current era of a "crisis of equality." From the perspective of the sociology of critique, this article asks how different social classes refer to beliefs about equality of outcomes and opportunity when criticizing and justifying inequality in contemporary Germany. Based on qualitative interviews with respondents from upper and lower social classes, I show that the ideal of equality is inherently ambivalent and contested: On the one hand, respondents across classes reject the idea of equalizing outcomes but criticize unequal opportunities. However, only upper-class respondents demand greater state intervention to bring about equality of opportunity, indicating that this ideal does not serve as a normative point of reference for the lower classes. At the same time, due to its individualist undertones, the ideal of equality of opportunity also contains a legitimizing potential. Paradoxically, then, ideals of equality appear to contribute little to the de-legitimation of inequality in contemporary Germany.

Keywords: Equality, equality of opportunity, inequality, legitimacy, sociology of critique, qualitative interviewing.

1. Introduction

In modern societies, social inequality is in need of legitimation. On the one hand, this is due to the fact that in the wake of the French Revolution, elites and citizens increasingly began to view societal circumstances as subject to human action, and thus potentially also to social change. On the other hand, the spread of the ideal of equality during the course of the Enlightenment put existing hierarchies and privileges under pressure (Dahrendorf 1968; Parsons 1970;

[*] Patrick Sachweh, Department of Sociology, Goethe University Frankfurt, Theodor W. Adorno-Platz 6, 60323 Frankfurt am Main, Germany; sachweh@soz.uni-frankfurt.de.

Rousseau 2009 [1755]). Correspondingly, the ideal of equality has been ascribed a central role in critiques of inequality and accompanying philosophical and public debates about social justice (Rosanvallon 2013). The notion of a natural or primordial equality of all men immediately removed the ground for any religious or naturalistic legitimation of inequality. As Dahrendorf pointed out:

> If all men are born free and equal in rights, how can we explain that some are rich and others poor, some respected and others ignored, some powerful and others in servitude? (Dahrendorf 1968, 157)

Thus, the ideal of equality – and the critique of existing hierarchies and inequality it enables – is understood as a key driving force behind the egalitarian social change that characterized Western capitalist democracies from the late 19th until the middle of the 20th century (Rosanvallon 2013; Kaelble 2014). Following the granting of civil and political rights, the drive towards greater equality culminated in the institutionalization of social rights in the welfare states in Western Europe and North America (Marshall 1950). Especially the period from the 1950s until the 1970s is often described as the "golden age" of welfare capitalism, when extensive institutional protections against the vagaries of the market kept social inequalities in check (Streeck 2013, 51).

Since the beginning of the 21st century, however, equality appears to be in crisis (Rosanvallon 2013). On the one hand, this is documented in rising inequalities of income and wealth, declining social mobility, deepening poverty, welfare state retrenchment and a growing political disengagement of the lower classes in many Western nations (OECD 2008; Piketty 2014). On the other hand, the very idea of equality itself appears to have lost its appeal as normative point of reference which could inspire future social change. In many Western societies, socio-cultural orientations emphasizing individuality, self-realization, autonomy, authenticity, and individual responsibility (Boltanski and Chiapello 2005) have contributed to weaken collectivistic notions of solidarity based on commonality (Rosanvallon 2013). Therefore, the question arises whether at the beginning of the 21st century, the ideal of equality still provides a relevant cognitive and normative blueprint for the critique of societal conditions in general, and socio-economic inequalities in particular. If not, what does this imply for the potential of egalitarian social change?

Against this backdrop, this article asks how ordinary people draw on the ideal of equality in criticizing and justifying inequality in contemporary Germany. This question is not only relevant from a perspective interested in current patterns of critique and legitimation of inequality. It is also fundamental to a sociological perspective on inequality, because social inequalities can only (permanently) be reproduced when the members of a society – and in particular the disadvantaged – regard it as justified (Lepsius 2015; Sachweh 2010). Moreover, the justification and critique of inequality hints at latent societal conflicts which might result in the emergence of political protest or social

movements, thereby giving voice to sentiments of injustice and discontent (Moore 1978).

Equality is among the most ambiguous and contested political-philosophical ideals. "Equality," as Miller explains, "seems only to be embraced unreservedly by political fanatics and philosophers" (Miller 1999, 231). A widely established fundamental distinction differentiates equality of outcomes and equality of opportunity: while equality of outcomes refers to an equal division of socially valued goods and resources, such as income or education, equality of opportunities means that every member within a society should have an equal chance to obtain such desirable positions or resources (Dworkin 1981; Roemer 1998).

Based on twenty qualitative interviews with members of upper and lower social classes, this article investigates how they draw upon beliefs about equality of outcomes and equality of opportunities when criticizing and justifying inequality in contemporary Germany. The German case is particularly interesting because its traditional self-image as a stable, socially integrated middle-class society (Schelsky 1965 [1953]) has recently been challenged by a rapid rise of income inequality during the last two decades (OECD 2008) and the transformation of the German welfare state, now emphasizing individual responsibility and activation instead of status maintenance and biographical continuity (Mau and Sachweh 2014). The theoretical framework of the paper is the pragmatic sociology of critique, which puts ordinary people's knowledge in the foreground and allows for an empirical reconstruction of their moral and normative orientations (Section 2). After a brief presentation of the data and methods used (Section 3), I present results from qualitative interviews which show that equality for respondents is an inherently ambivalent and controversial ideal: while strict equality of outcomes is rejected across class boundaries, a lack of opportunities is lamented by respondents from both the lower and upper classes. Yet, only respondents from the upper classes regard equal opportunities as a positive normative point of reference, while its individualist undertones renders the position of this ideal ambivalent. Given equal opportunities, inequalities of outcome based on merit are in the individual's responsibility and thus appear acceptable to upper-class respondents (Section 4). Paradoxically, then, ideals of equality appear to contribute little to the de-legitimation of inequality in contemporary Germany. As a consequence, forms of critique that seek to bring about egalitarian social change might have to either turn to other ideas or formulate a redefined notion of equality on which to base their appeal (Section 5).

2. Theoretical Background: The Sociology of Critique

The sociology of critique emerged in French social theory particularly through the work of Luc Boltanski and Laurent Thévenot (Boltanski and Thévenot 1999, 2006; Dubet 2009). Focusing on the everyday *practices of criticism and*

justification carried out by reflective actors (Boltanski 2010, 40ff.), this perspective departs from conventional critical approaches, represented in French sociology most prominently by Pierre Bourdieu and his followers (Bourdieu 1989; Bourdieu et al. 1999). The sociology of critique does not consider members of society to be victims of anonymous processes of domination and power relations, but instead as actors equipped with critical skills who take an active stand to social relations. Diaz-Bone (2017, in this volume) extensively discusses the relationship between conventions and power for the study of critique. "If we want to take seriously the claims of actors when they denounce social injustice, criticize power relationships or unveil their foes' hidden motives," Boltanski and Thévenot argue,

> we must conceive of them as endowed with an ability to differentiate legitimate and illegitimate ways of rendering criticisms and justifications. It is, more precisely, this competence which characterizes the ordinary sense of justice which people implement in their disputes. (Boltanski and Thévenot 1999, 364)

This "everyday sense of justice" is necessary, according to Boltanski, in order

> to make visible the gap which exists between the social world as given and the one that would correspond to people's moral expectations. In fact, it is possible for the sociologist through the acquisition of the viewpoint of the actor to take a normative view of the world, without this view being guided by personal options [...] or by recourse to a substantive moral philosophy. (Boltanski 2010, 56-7, translation P.S.)

Therefore, the intention of the sociology of critique is to "allow normativity to emerge from the description itself" (Boltanski 2010, 48, translation P.S.). Thereby, the everyday practices of critique and justification by "ordinary" people become the subject of sociological research while at the same time informing a sociologically grounded social criticism.

In this way, the sociology of critique can handle the problem encountered by conventional critical social theory of having no immanent standard against which critique can be gauged (cf. Boltanski 2010, 39). From the perspective of the sociology of critique, this standard lies in the knowledge of actors themselves. In everyday conflicts, or "disputes," actors criticise social practices and institutions or formulate claims regarding justification, thereby referring to socially shared and accepted principles or "regimes of justification" which serve as normative points of reference (Boltanski and Thévenot 1999; Celikates 2008). Similar to the "sociology of knowledge," the sociology of critique is thus guided by the premise that in describing, justifying, and criticizing social relations, actors refer to "socially and culturally mediated modes of argumentation" (Celikates 2008, 122, translation P.S.) to interpret situations and justify their points of view.

Boltanski and Thévenot have outlined six "regimes of justification" (Boltanski and Thévenot 1999) – or "orders of worth" (Boltanski and Thévenot 2006)

– which provide the grammar for formulating such critiques or justifications. They reconstruct the basic content of these regimes (or orders) from a variety of data sources: ordinary people's argumentations in situations of dispute, theories of ancient political philosophy, and contemporary management handbooks (Boltanski and Thévenot 1999). Specifically, they differentiate between a domestic order, an order of fame (or "renown"), an order of inspiration, a civic order, an order of the market, and an industrial order. To these, an ecological and a project- or network-based "order of worth" have recently been added (Diaz-Bone 2015, 147-51). These different orders (or regimes) enable actors to assign status (or worth) to people on the basis of specific "principles of equivalence," a standard "which clarifies what they have in common" (Boltanski and Thévenot 1999, 361).[1] To each of these orders of worth, a corresponding "common world" – or polity (Boltanski and Thévenot 2006, 130) – exists in which a specific order unfolds its full validity.

Yet, contrary to pluralistic philosophical theories of social justice such as by Walzer (1983) or Miller (1999), Boltanski and Thévenot do not assume that a given order of worth (or conception of justice) strictly corresponds to a specific social sphere (i.e., the economy, the state, etc.). Rather, they maintain that people can draw on a plurality of regimes (or orders of worth) when looking at one and the same social situation or sphere (Boltanski and Thévenot 1999, 373; Dubet 2009). This way, the combination of different orders of worth opens up a space for formulating critique and adjudicating compromises (Boltanski and Thévenot 2006, 237ff.). In this case, the critique formulated is an external one because an alternative "order of worth" is alluded to when a given situation is judged. External critiques may either denounce that a given standard of evaluation in fact reflects another order of worth or that the principle of equivalence of a given order should be replaced. On the other hand, critique can also be *internal* to a specific order, for instance when a certain principle of equivalence is seen not to be adequately realized (Boltanski and Thévenot 1999, 373).

However, with regard to the content of the specific orders of worth reconstructed by Boltanski and Thévenot (1999, 2006) one might critically ask to what extent their approach indeed places the actors' perspective at the centre.

[1] In the domestic order, status is based on people's standing in a hierarchy of trust in relations of personal dependence (Boltanski and Thévenot 1999, 370). In the order of renown, status is assigned to those with high esteem, as reflected by the opinion of others, while in the order of inspiration, high status is ascribed to "the saint who achieves a state of grace, or the artist who receives inspiration" (Boltanski and Chiapello 2005, 23). In the civic order, status is based upon a concern for the general interest and the common good, whereas in the industrial order, worth is based on productivity and efficiency (Boltanski and Thévenot 1999, 371-2; Boltanski and Chiapello 2005, 23). In the market order, status is based upon success in the market and wealth thus generated (Boltanski and Chiapello 2005, 24). Finally, in the ecological order, worth is based upon respect for the integrity of the environment, whereas in the network-based order, status is assigned to those who are able to successfully manage and finish projects (Diaz-Bone 2015, 153).

Rather than being the result of a genuine inductive reconstruction, Boltanski and Thévenot combine inductive (ordinary peoples disputes) and deductive reasoning (political philosophy, handbooks/manuals) in conceiving the orders of worth on which actors are supposed to base their critique. Thus, relying too strongly on pre-defined regimes of justification when interpreting ordinary people's critiques and justifications of inequality may risk squandering a key strength of the sociology of critique: its openness to actors' everyday knowledge.

Therefore, in the empirical section I first approach ordinary people's views on equality of outcome and opportunities – and the implications of these views for the justification and critique of inequality – from an inductive perspective. After having reconstructed these views, the discussion section of this article then concludes the analysis by relating this inductive reconstruction to the conception of Boltanski and Thévenot, thus feeding back my results into a broader theoretical debate.

3. Data and Analysis

The analysis is based on 20 semi-structured interviews with members of privileged and disadvantaged social classes, which were conducted from April to September 2007 in the Bremen area. Respondents were recruited using snowball sampling, in which individual interviewees refer to other (potential) respondents (Biernacki and Waldorf 1981). The central selection criterion for inclusion in the sample was respondents' class position according to the EGP class scheme, which is based on differences in employment (service vs. employment contract) to determine privileged and disadvantaged class positions (Goldthorpe 2000). Respondents from the *privileged classes* included six members of the higher service class and four self-employed academics (interviews B-1 to B-6 and D-1 to D-4). The members of the *disadvantaged classes* included two skilled workers, four routine non-manual employees (including two receiving supplementary social assistance), three long-term unemployed respondents and a housewife (interviews A-1 to A-4 and C-1 to C-6). In both groups, men and women were recruited in roughly equal numbers. In order to overcome the employment bias of many class-schemes, respondents not integrated into the labour market (the unemployed, a homemaker) were included by taking their previous occupation into account (or in the case of a housewife, the profession of the husband). The average age of this sample is 46.5 years.

To reconstruct people's views on ideals of equality, I followed interviewing techniques suggested by Ullrich (1999) in the context of the 'discursive interview.' This method is particularly well-suited for the reconstruction of collectively-shared, taken-for-granted worldviews from individual interview data. Compared to traditional qualitative approaches, the interviewing techniques of

discursive interviews involve a stronger structuring of the interview guide and a more directive style of interviewing in order to tap into the justifications and lines of reasoning which underlie respondents' viewpoints. On average, the interviews lasted between 60 and 120 minutes and discussed respondents' perceptions of the extent, forms, causes, justification, and consequences of social inequality in Germany. Generally, the interviews started with a brief conversation about the recent rise in inequality in Germany, asking respondents whether they thought this was the case and, if so, how they could observe inequality in their everyday experience. Subsequently, I asked respondents about whom they saw as the "winners" and "losers" in contemporary German society; what they viewed as the causes of inequality; how they would interpret specific distributive principles and whether they regard current socio-economic disparities as fair; and, finally, what they think the personal and societal consequences of inequality are. The following empirical findings are based primarily on interview segments which asked respondents for overall evaluations of social inequality as well as their views on specific principles of social justice, including not only equality but also merit and need. However, in this article I concentrate on respondents' views on equality; more detailed analyses of their views on merit and need can be found in Sachweh (2012, 2010).

All interviews were fully transcribed and coded both inductively and deductively using a qualitative data analysis software package (MaxQDA) (Gibbs 2007). During the analysis, all interview transcripts were initially coded thematically based on the content of the interview guide as well as with regard to new themes and issues that emerged during the analysis. These codes were then used for thematic retrievals to systematically compare respondents across groups (Kelle and Kluge 1999; Ullrich 1999). Based on this synoptic reading of the entire material, the categories were then extended and refined into new (sub-)categories in a second round of coding. This strategy allowed for the identification of empirically grounded interpretive patterns to emerge gradually during the analysis (Ullrich 1999). To facilitate the presentation of the findings, all respondents were given pseudonyms.

4. Empirical Findings

The empirical part of this article investigates how people from privileged and disadvantaged social classes in Germany interpret the ideals of equality of opportunity and equality of outcomes. Specifically, I reconstruct their understanding and assessment of these conceptions and ask how they are applied in the critique and justification of inequality in contemporary Germany. Overall, the findings indicate that perceptions and interpretations of ideals of equality are less "consensual" or socially shared than other ideals of justice, especially merit and need (Sachweh 2010, 2012). This applies in particular to the ideal of

equality of opportunity, which is addressed to a much greater degree by upper-class respondents than by those from the lower classes. Yet, it also applies to the ideal of equality of outcomes, especially insofar as this – in contrast to merit or need – encounters almost universal rejection among respondents.

4.1 "The 'Pursuit of Happiness' Is Unequally Distributed, Which I Think Is Unfair" – Views on Equality of Opportunity

As a normative ideal, equality of opportunity demands that everybody in society should have equal chances in obtaining valued goods and resources – such as education or occupational positions –, regardless of his or her gender, social or ethnic origin, skin colour etc. (Miller 1999). Interestingly, despite the fact that Germany is known for its socially selective educational system which contributes to the maintenance of educational disparities between upper- and lower-class children (Müller and Pollak 2004), the issue of equality of opportunity is mainly addressed by respondents from the upper classes and the self-employed. In line with the much-publicized results of the first PISA-study, the interviewees from this group note the existence *of marked inequalities in opportunities* in Germany, for instance by pointing to educational disparities structured by social or ethnic origin. Irene Dietz, a district manager, explains this using the example of a foreign friend of her son, who comes from a disadvantaged district of Bremen and attended high school in their own (privileged) area:

> [H]e also has the problem that he cannot talk the way we are used to. The teachers were always angry saying that he makes comments that are simply flippant [...], and he has had great difficulties. And I'm not sure if he will finish school at all. (Interview D-1)

In the eyes of this respondent, equality of opportunity is not automatically guaranteed by attending secondary school – which is indeed given in this example. Instead, it also depends on the possession of specific "cultural capital" (Bourdieu 1977), which for this respondent is related to differences in socialization and upbringing. However, inequality of opportunity is not only found in specific instances such as access to formal education. Some respondents also note unequal life-chances in a broader and more comprehensive way. This is expressed by the former college professor, Dieter Keller, who states the following:

> The possibilities in life are distributed unequally. And you could do something about it, to remedy it. Erm, so starting with money, then education and opportunities to realize oneself [...]. [T]he 'pursuit of happiness' is unequally distributed, which I think is unfair. (Interview B-4)

This statement makes clear that in the eyes of the respondents, unequal opportunities are not limited to specific areas (education, income) but instead refer to the "pursuit of happiness" as a whole, which is perceived as unjust and problematic. The self-employed Angela Elster thus believes "that not everyone has the same opportunities, that is, certain things are denied. And that's always a

problem, I think" (Interview D-4). Accordingly, for her "justice" would mean "that everyone should have the same opportunities" (Interview D-4). These statements illustrate that for upper-class respondents, equality of opportunity also forms a normative reference point on which they base their critique of inequality, and its realization is seen as both a political ideal and a political task. The self-employed district manager Irene Dietz illustrates this in her answer to the question of what justice means to her:

> That there are the same opportunities for all people, and we do not have that. [...] To have all that goes with it, to have a say, to educate oneself, to feed oneself, to participate culturally, to be able to participate politically. (Interview D-1)

Equality of opportunity is thus considered a normative ideal to be realized. In this context, respondents refer to the state's responsibility to combat unequal opportunities. The personnel consultant, Barbara Fuchs-Willmann, thinks it is "society's duty […] to encourage someone who comes from a lower-class background, if they have the necessary intelligence" (Interview D-2, 49). Similarly, the retired ministry official, Hans Lucke, sees it as a "duty of the state" to establish, through the provision of "general education, a compulsory education," the conditions that will enable individuals "to develop their abilities, to realize themselves" (Interview B-3).

In addition to emphasizing state responsibility, however, the upper-class respondents I spoke to point out that the realization of equal opportunities in their view not only depends on conditions provided by the state, but also on individuals' motivation, work-ethic, and personal decisions. Yet, respondents do not adhere to a simple "rags-to-riches myth" here, according to which a privileged position in society is seen to depend solely on an individual's performance and willingness to work hard. Although they emphasize the importance of this individual component, at the same time they point out that certain government interventions are necessary so that decisions are made meaningful and individual plans can flourish. The following two opinions given by the district manager, Irene Dietz, and the retired ministry official, Hans Lucke, illustrate this:

> Everyone can decide if they take their chance when they have it. But when they do not have one, then it cannot be taken. That, to me, is the whole point. (Irene Dietz, Interview D-1)

> Equal opportunities [...] are indeed based on both sides. One is the will of individuals to develop their abilities and potential skills to professional satisfaction and performance – to achieve the pursuit of happiness. But this individual will won't suffice if the conditions for realizing it are not there. (Hans Lucke, Interview B-3)

The interviewees therefore regard both components – conditions set by the state and individual behaviour – as important prerequisites for the granting of

equal opportunities.[2] With respect to the evaluation and legitimation of social inequalities this means that inequalities are regarded as unjust or illegitimate as long as they can be attributed to a failure to realize actual and state-provided opportunities. But to the extent that the formal conditions of equal opportunities are in place, inequalities due to individual differences in talent, effort, and decisions are regarded as justified. In this sense, Hans Lucke, the former ministry official, believes that the provision of (greater) equality of opportunity by the government represents "the basis for choosing a profession, or a workplace where material inequalities are also ameliorated" (Interview B-3).

The ideal of equality of opportunity therefore occupies an ambivalent position in interviewees' interpretations: on the one hand, it serves as a standard for critically evaluating existing inequalities, as long as a de-facto (and government-related) lack of equal opportunities can be identified. On the other hand, the emphasis on individual abilities, skills, and decisions also reveals the legitimizing potential inherent in the idea of equality of opportunity, since inequalities resulting from individual differences in skills, talent, or actions are considered justified by the respondents. Very few respondents display a far-reaching understanding of equal opportunities which would demand the compensation of differences in individual characteristics and conditions of socialization. Moreover, it is striking that equality of opportunity is widely favoured as the normative ideal among respondents from the upper classes.[3] Although members of the lower classes also recognize unequal opportunities, as for instance in the influence of social origin on educational outcomes, equality of opportunity to them functions less as a normative reference point than for the upper-class respondents. Hence, class differences exist in the degree to which equality of opportunity represents a normative ideal.

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[2] At this point, however, differences between classes emerge. A long-term unemployed female, Ulrike Rimek, formulates a "demanding" concept of equal opportunities, which she defines as "for all to have equal opportunities to education and training, and, yes, even to standards of living, just so one is not, so to say, simply born in a caste. The state should provide, so that the failures of the parental home are ironed out, so that ultimately all somehow end up with the same horizon and the same opportunities. And not this inheritance system, where you either inherit a wealthy origin or not, and then ultimately everything depends on this" (Interview C-1). Yet, as the idea of equality of opportunity is not very significant for lower-class respondents as a normative ideal, class differences in the interpretation of equal opportunities cannot be addressed in greater detail.

[3] Some – though not all – upper-class respondents are aware of the fact that their own actions also play a role in the reproduction of unequal opportunities, for instance when a female self-employed therapist talks about making an explicit choice with regard to her son's school, "because I won't go to just any school" (Interview D-3). Importantly, the awareness of her own agency forms the backdrop of a critical assessment of lower-class parents' supposed lack of engagement and involvement in their children's educational trajectories (cf. Sachweh 2010, 221-2).

4.2 "Imagine That, According to Marx and Engels, and We're All Running Around in Blue Overalls" - Views on Equality of Outcomes

Looking at the idea of equality of outcomes, however, reveals greater agreement between interview partners from different classes. Unlike other principles of justice (merit, need), the idea of equality of outcomes – understood as equal material living conditions across different social groups (Dworkin 1981) – is rejected by almost all interviewees as normatively unattractive and unrealizable in practice. This is particularly the case with regard to the economic sphere and the distribution of earnings, for which the principle of merit is regarded as the key legitimate distributive principle (cf. Sachweh 2012 for details). The only social sphere where respondents consider an equal distribution as desirable or normative is the area of citizenship rights (cf. also Miller 1999). The engineer, Günther Schulze, for example, found "with regard to their rights, they [people, P.S.] are of course all the same, [...] and also with regard to their legal claims" (Interview B-2). An equal distribution of rights – and equal opportunities to enforce these rights – thus appears to respondents to be a precept of justice. Any deviation from this, that some respondents stated was a reality, is therefore felt to be unacceptable. This position was argued by Christian Berger, who holds a doctorate in business administration:

> [I]t's right that every person is treated the same in certain situations, [...] that there is no difference between people, as for example before the law. There are certain people who [...] one sometimes thinks after a decision that, well, these judgments are due more to the fact that the person is very important, or even know people who are very important and it has had an influence, which is completely unjust. (Interview B-1)

The equal distribution of rights is thus considered as just and regarded as a normative and moral imperative.

This is different with regard to the distribution of economic or material goods. Here, an equal distribution is rejected by almost all respondents. This is especially the case for the distribution of earnings, but also applies to equal standards-of-living in a more general sense. The arguments with which the interviewees reject equality of outcomes refer, on the one hand, to its practical unrealizability, as human nature would not allow for an equal distribution of resources (cf. Sachweh 2014) and, on the other hand, to differences in people's interests.

Moreover, it is rejected as normatively unacceptable because without inequality the "incentive character" of social differences would be lost (Sachweh 2012). Hence, interviewees' negative response to equality of outcomes is based on their interpretations of inequality as inevitable as well as to entrenched conceptions of merit.

The practical unrealizability of a substantial levelling of material goods is mainly justified by the interviewees on what they view as a purportedly universal human nature. Here, they argue that people in general are ambitious, individualistic, and greedy and always strive to be better than each other. A far-reaching levelling of socio-economic living standards is thus not possible, since individuals would always try to surpass each other or take advantage of one another. A typical statement in this regard is made by the former entrepreneur, Heinrich Stolberg, who explains the unrealizability of equality as follows:

> I think that human nature does not allow it. There will always be a bunch of people who say, 'What? Leave me behind? Should I settle for the same as they have over there? No. I'm better.' [...] This is the hunger for success that exists naturally in humans. [...] [T]his is always forging ahead. You can not even it out and treat everyone equally. We'll not manage that. (Interview B-6)

This view is prevalent not only among respondents from the upper classes, but also among workers, routine employees, and the unemployed. An idea expressed by the skilled worker Reinhold Wieser, for instance, illustrates this:

> Communist principles cannot be achieved because of human nature. That was already true in the Stone Age, when one had a bark skirt and the other a bearskin, then it occurs to the one with the bark skirt that the bearskin perhaps is warmer, and so he hits him on the head. So, this is human envy, this is human greed. [...] But we will not manage to give everyone the same. No one will ever be completely satisfied. (Interview A-3)

These quotes illustrate that equality of (economic) outcomes is deemed to be in conflict with human nature, and hence its practicability is questioned. Envy, ambition, greed, and a notorious level of dissatisfaction are identified by the respondents as a fundamental anthropological constant, and blamed for the prevention of equality. Thereby, the interviews document a surprising persistence of "naturalistic" or "essentialist" interpretations of inequality which sociological theory widely believes to have been abandoned in modern times (Sachweh 2014).

Yet, in the eyes of respondents, equality of outcomes is not only impractical but also normatively undesirable. Interviewees from the upper and lower classes emphasize the incentive function of inequality for securing individual motivation and willingness to perform. For example, Uwe Klenke, who is long-term unemployed, believes "that someone would not bother to work hard if, no matter how much he works or what he does, he could only earn 500 euros a month [laughing]" (Interview A-4). Besides the fact that these respondents seem implicitly to equate equality of outcomes with lower incomes, this quote also illustrates very clearly that respondents from the lower classes regard unequal pay as a motivating factor and an important incentive. Willingness to work hard ("bother to work," "how much he works") and the assumption of certain activities ("what he does") in the eyes of the respondents are influenced by an appropriate remuneration and thus appear to be primarily extrinsically

motivated. Along similar lines, the long-term unemployed Ulrike Rimek mentions the concept of an unconditional basic income during the interview and judges it quite ambivalently. She says,

> I am also motivated to do something [if there was a universal basic income, P.S.], but there are also plenty of people [...], who would then no longer go to work. (Interview C-1)

These examples suggest that the principle of pay differentiation appears to be so deeply entrenched in the moral economy of modern societies that even those who would benefit from an equalization of material goods reject this not only for practical reasons, but also on normative grounds (Hochschild 1981; Sachweh 2012). In this instance, the principles of equality and merit are directly opposed to each other. Occasionally, practical and normative arguments are also mixed, for instance when extrinsic motivation, which emphasizes the incentive aspect of inequality, is declared a basic human characteristic. Arno Müller, an unskilled worker, explains the unrealizability of equality of outcomes as follows:

> Ah, then you have to practically create a whole new type of person. I always imagine what a doctor would do. And who in this totally equal society would then actually still want to work 12 hours as a chief physician? It will not happen, or hardly. There are not that many idealistic doctors. (Interview A-1)

Thus, under the conditions of a fictitious equality of outcomes, "idealism" in the form of intrinsic motivation is viewed as a necessary prerequisite to attract people to perform specific difficult or challenging tasks. This idealism, however, is considered to be an exception, and motivation by external incentives is assumed to be the norm.

5. Summary and Discussion

The starting point of this article was the observation that in modern societies, the ideal of equality is attributed a central role in the critique of social inequality. Yet, in the current era of rising inequality, equality appears to be in crisis – both as a social structural attribute of Western societies and as a normative ideal which could inspire social change (Rosanvallon 2013). Starting from the distinction between equality of opportunity and equality of outcomes, I asked how actors themselves interpret these two ideals of equality, and how they are applied in critiques of contemporary structures of inequality in Germany. This question is sociologically relevant because inequality can persist only to the extent that it is deemed legitimate. Furthermore, ordinary citizens' interpretations of inequality and social justice – and the discontent and critique they express – indicate latent social conflicts and cleavages which may give rise to popular protest and social movements (Thompson 1971; Moore 1978).

Based on 20 semi-structured qualitative interviews with people from upper and lower social classes, the results show that equality is an ambiguous and partly contested ideal among the interviewees: On the one hand, the idea of equal opportunities is a positive normative reference point for the more privileged respondents. While interviewees from disadvantaged classes also believed that opportunities in Germany are distributed unequally – emphasizing, for instance, the impact of social background on one's position in society – they do so more in line with a "structural" explanation of existing inequalities from which no plea for greater government intervention to ensure equal opportunities is derived. As a normative ideal, equality of opportunity is thus more significant for respondents from the upper classes. Equality of outcomes, by contrast, is opposed by all respondents and therefore rejected as a principle for the distribution of socio-economic goods and resources because it is said to disregard human nature and to provide no incentives. Here, a strong convergence of the interviewees from different classes is apparent.

With regard to the regimes of justification reconstructed by Boltanski and Thévenot (1999, 2006), one could interpret the *critique of unequal opportunities* the upper-class respondents articulate as a clash between the "civic" and the "domestic" order. From the perspective of the "civic" order, pointing out the impact of social origin on people's life-chances reveals the "domestic" – i.e. familial – linkages which operate to influence the process of status attainment. Thus, the critique of unequal opportunities voiced from the viewpoint of the civic order is in line with its focus on liberation from personal dependence (Boltanski and Thévenot 2006, 252) and to some extent parallels the shift from "ascription" to "achievement" in the process of status allocation in modern societies (Parsons 1970). By contrast, the civic order can also become the focus of critique, particularly when the respondents point out the *impossibility of equal outcomes*. They do so from the perspective of the "inspired" and the "industrial" order. On the one hand, the interviewees' assertion that innate differences in human abilities, talents, and interests render an equalization of outcomes practically impossible can be seen to resonate with inspired critiques of civic worth "in its most institutionalized forms, heavily instrumented and detached from persons" (Boltanski and Thévenot 2006, 239). On the other hand, the view stated by many respondents that equal outcomes would stifle individual effort and ambition echoes judgements of unworthiness in the industrial order that are addressed to those who are unproductive, inactive, or unmotivated (Boltanski and Thévenot 2006, 205). In sum, one could thus say that both ideals, equality of outcomes and of opportunities, share to some extent a concern for the collective interest that is also pertinent in the civic order. Yet, in the case of equality of outcomes, this concern seems to come at the expense of individuals' personal development, thus indicating a basic tension between conceptions of equality focusing on commonality and individuals' desire for the recognition of their "singularity" (Rosanvallon 2013).

What are the implications of these findings for the potential of an egalitarian critique of contemporary forms of inequality and for social change following from that? If the importance the sociology of critique grants to ordinary actors' practices and semantics of critique (and justification) is warranted, the implications of the results presented above may be rather disappointing for egalitarians. Paradoxically, "equality" appears to contribute little to the de-legitimation of social inequality in contemporary Germany. Although equality of opportunity forms a normative reference point for upper-class respondents, who demand stronger state involvement in realizing equal opportunities, this ideal at the same time carries a potential for legitimizing inequality insofar as the realization of equal opportunities is also seen as depending on individual characteristics, such as talent and effort. This way, the ideal of equality of opportunity can be linked to (legitimating) "naturalistic" interpretations of inequality which evade more fundamental demands of justice (Sachweh 2014). Furthermore, the full implementation of equal opportunities "could also lead to a hierarchical and depressing society, one in which everyone's life outcome would be determined […] solely by personal attributes and efforts" (Rosanvallon 2016, 20).

Which alternative ideals might then be able to motivate social change? One such ideal, on which claims for improving the position of the most disadvantaged could be based, is need. But this principle, as recent reforms of basic income security in Germany ("*Hartz IV*") have well illustrated, can also be interpreted restrictively (e.g., through a rigid definition of legitimate needs) and thus remains limited in supporting the realization of greater equality (Fraser 1990; Somers and Block 2005). Furthermore, the individualist undertones of the notion of equal opportunities expressed by the upper-class respondents resonate with welfare reforms which focused on "activation" and "individual responsibility" (Lessenich 2008), thereby illustrating the legitimacy of these reforms among this group (Mau and Sachweh 2014). The only alternative potential for an egalitarian critique of inequality might thus lie in the *redefinition of the ideal of equality* that bypasses some of the critiques that the analysis presented in this article indicates. Along these lines, Rosanvallon (2016, 22) has recently argued that "[o]nly a more robust vision of democratic equality – based on the singularity of individuals, reciprocal relations among them, and a social commonality – can provide the foundation for broadly accepted public policies that can attack the trends towards inequality." Which social groups might be the actors formulating and advocating such a conception, however, is an open question.

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